



TENDER(LOIN) IS THE NIGHT

THE STARS OF DRAG'S GRITTY FRONTIER, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

By **Jeremy Lybarger** Photography by **James Hosking**

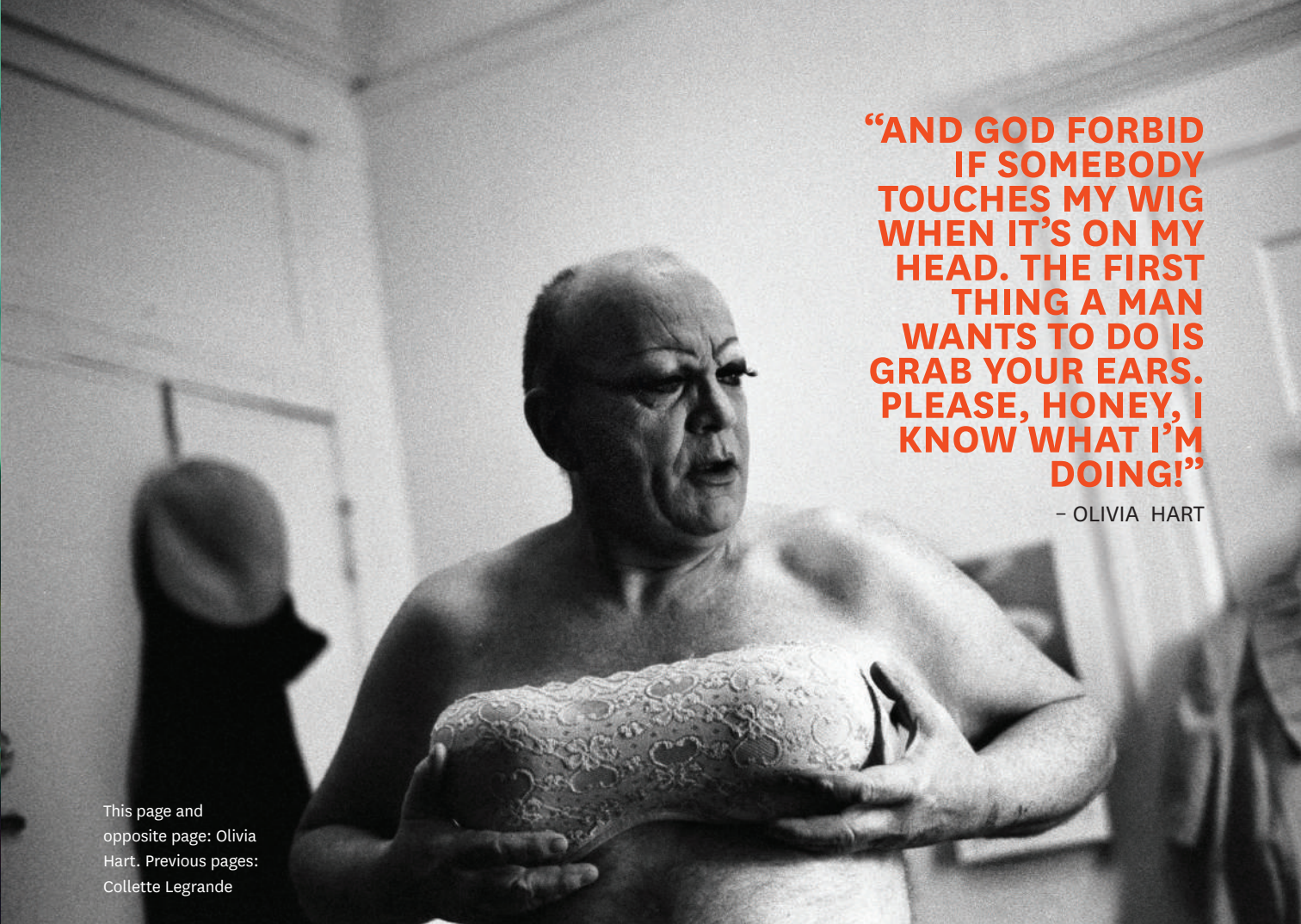


It's MIDNIGHT at Aunt Charlie's Lounge and everyone is drunk. The drag show is deep into its last act. Against the mirrored wall, two men in the audience, enmeshed like iguanas, sing to each other. A man in a pith helmet creeps down the bar's narrow aisle and presents his dollar tip delicately, as if it were a corsage. Five bachelorettes steeped in crantinis caterwaul each time a queen emerges from the curtain: "She's hot! She's fucking perfect!" In the bar's pink neon, faces are exultant and overripe.

Maybe because Aunt Charlie's is windowless, it's easy to forget that it's about 200 feet from the most dangerous block in San Francisco. If you stand outside and look east, toward the intersection of Turk and Taylor, you'll see a Shangri-la of residential hotels—the Warfield, the Winston Arms, the Dalt—a former porn theater, a fenced

parking lot, and across from that, 21 Club, a dive bar that's like flypaper for the neighborhood's junkies, pimps, and dealers. The air is electric with need. Bent silhouettes shuffle down the street, heads down, dowsing for crack or meth. Hookers clip-clop back and forth like trick ponies. The sidewalk is a thoroughfare for homeless people piloting shopping carts or shouldering trash bags. Every 20 feet, there's a puddle of urine or asterisk of shit.

This is the Tenderloin. Crime rates here are 35 times higher than anywhere else in the city. But inside Aunt Charlie's—which is long and low-ceilinged and as warm as a throat—there's the serenity of cheap booze. It's the last gay bar in the neighborhood and a favorite watering hole for men from nearby SROs and rent-controlled apartments. There's Cowboy Bob in his big white Stetson;



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— OLIVIA HART

This page and
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Hart. Previous pages:
Collette Legrande

bug-eyed Eddie swaying to the jukebox; Jerry, a cigar store Indian come to life. By 9 p.m., most of the regulars have rotated out for the prime-time crowd there for the drag show.

That there even is a drag show is ludicrous. I’ve been in shuttle buses bigger than Aunt Charlie’s. There is no stage, just a clearing at the back where tables are wedged against the wall. A spotlight hangs from the ceiling, along with a disco ball and strands of be-draggled Christmas lights. There is wall-to-wall carpeting. For a couple of years there was a fog machine that emitted mace-like smog, but now the bar’s only atmospheric disturbances are weed (which the queens smoke by the kilo backstage), disinfectant, and body odor.

Unlike glitzier drag clubs in New York or Los Angeles, Aunt Charlie’s looks like a basement at the edge of the world. The production is ramshackle: CDs skip, wigs tilt, falsies ride up out of cleavage, and yet there are nights when the show is almost transcendent. Three or four strong cocktails help, but still, there’s a sense that the place and its people are special. Most of the queens are middle-aged; a few draw pensions. When they mention this or that performer who died years ago—often of AIDS-related complications or drugs or alcohol—it’s hard not to think of drag as a big *fuck you* to the infinite.

But drag is a lonely art. Rarely do we see a queen and contemplate the private rituals that brought her into the world. All we know is that these beautiful creatures on stage are ours to possess. Warhol wrote that drag queens “perform a documentary service, usually consecrating their lives to keeping the glittering alternative alive and available for (not-too-close) inspection.”

As proof that the glittering alternative is yours if you want it, here are the stories of three Tenderloin broads.

OLIVIA HART: A MAN IN A DRESS

It’s Saturday afternoon at Olivia Hart’s hotel. She’s in her room, smoking and drinking coffee. She has lived here four years, and it shows. The room is piled with wigs and bags and dresses, disorderly stacks of paper, kitchen gadgets and exercise balls and knife-sharpening sets, all the plastic debris of midnight informercials. Dirty dishes soak in the bathroom sink. Cockroaches scuttle up the wall. It’s relatively quiet and warm, however, which is more than can be said of many pay-by-the-week hotels.

Olivia came to San Francisco after a friend told her it was where she belonged. She managed a gay resort in the Poconos at the time and had never been farther west than Kansas. “I wanted a change,” she says, and San Francisco sounded more alluring than another winter battened down in the mountains of Pennsylvania. So like generations of queens before her, she packed her car and drove toward the rainbow.

It wasn’t long before she found a cadre of like-minded queens. By like-minded, I mean sober. After decades of alcoholism, Olivia’s vices are now black coffee and cigarettes, both of which she imbibes in industrial quantities. It’s a diet that complements her performance style, a throwback to drag cabarets where the queens were at once motherly and sex-crazed. Mock fellatio is a favorite bit of choreography, as is plying the audience with candy and trinkets fished from her décolletage. Her big showstopper is a Cher medley during which she wears a complexly draped crim-

son-and-gold ensemble that’s one part hijab, one part vagina. As the number crescendos, she bucks off her wig and reaches for the spotlight, a bald man in lipstick and mascara crucifying himself for his art.

WHEN DID YOU START DOING DRAG?

When I was 3 or 4 years old. I’d go over to play with the neighbor girls, and we’d end up in their mother’s dresses and high heels. There were cute little hats that matched the dresses. I liked the whole thing. I liked the feel of panty hose.

WHEN DID YOU START AGAIN AS AN ADULT?

In 1998, we had a cross-dresser weekend at the hotel I worked at, so I dressed for that. I was the waitress. I was around all these cross-dressers, and I wanted them to feel comfortable. It just stuck. Eventually, the girls doing drag invited me to do shows. I ended up getting my own show at the resort. I had a star’s dressing room filled with clothing and wigs and shoes. The dressing up got me out of my shell.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE OLIVIA?

My thing is not being a female illusionist where I look dead-on like a woman. I’m a man in a dress, and I’m not afraid to show that. I just use a little bit of shading. Olivia and I are pretty much one and the same. It’s not a total transformation. I’d need to see a psychiatrist if that happened.

DO YOU PRACTICE FEMININE GESTURES?

I’ve got them all anyhow because I’m a faggot. They come naturally.

HOW DID YOU COME OUT TO YOUR FAMILY?

I got drunk when I was 13, around New Year’s Eve, and told my mom I was gay.

HOW DID SHE REACT?

She locked that in a strongbox and put it all the way back until I was probably 30-ish, 35.

WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HER LIKE?

Back then I was insecure, and whatever Mommy wanted Mommy got. She wanted me to get married because “this gay thing is all just a phase.” So I got married when I was 24. It lasted 14 years, but I knew it was over in the first six months. It was supposed to be a safe marriage, but then my wife said she didn’t want me to see my boys anymore. So I led the straight life—went to work, came home, bitched at the wife, went to bed. I made animal traps, possum and bear traps, at a factory. I worked at a machine eight hours a day. It was 14 years of hell. The only good thing that came out of it is that I’m still HIV-negative.

IS THAT WHEN THE DRINKING STARTED?

I started drinking when I was 9 years old. It was a way for me to hide the fact that I was gay and not like everybody else. I have an addictive personality anyway.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN SOBER?

Over 11 years now. I got sober in a bar. I was still working in the resort back east when I quit. Most of the time it doesn’t affect me, but every once in a while, out of the blue, it’ll reach out and try to make me drink. It’s an awful, awful thing.

WOULD YOU EVER GO BACK TO WORKING IN THE POCONOS?

I grew up in Manheim [Pa.], which is two towns over from Hershey. Most of my family on my mother’s side either worked



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– COLLETTE
LEGRANDE

at or retired from the chocolate factory. They all say they can get me a job there, but no, honey! I’d be so fat I wouldn’t be able to get out of my chair. My mom worked there. Her job was getting the candy ready for wrapping, but every so often she had to taste one. She gained a lot of weight.

IS IT EASY TO MEET MEN DRESSED AS OLIVIA?

At times. But I have a screen up—they don’t see me the way I really am. A lot of straight guys are fascinated with my cleavage. They all want to touch it. Well go ahead, honey, I’ll touch you while you touch me. There’s a group of Hispanic boys in front of the Carl’s Jr. that are always whistling at me. In the Tenderloin sometimes I get picked up by somebody who wants to pleasure me. It’s 12:30 at night then, and they ain’t getting nothing until all this [drag] comes off. If I’m going to have sex, I’m not going to do it dressed as a girl. And God forbid if somebody touches my wig when it’s on my head. The first thing a man wants to do is grab your ears. Please, honey, I know what I’m doing!

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT AUNT CHARLIE’S?

I’m home at Aunt Charlie’s. For the most part, the girls are good girls. Every once in a while, you get a crabby old bitch in there. And after the show people tell you you’re the greatest. A few minutes later, you hear them tell another girl the same thing.

ARE YOU HAPPY?

I’m gay. I have to be happy.

COLLETTE LEGRANDE: A DIRTY, ROTTEN BITCH

Collette LeGrande’s voice is high, lonesome America. It’s the guttural singsong of carnival barkers and cattle auctions, a voice indigenous to truck stops and barrooms. For 26 years, it was also the voice you heard if you picked up a phone and dialed 0. She was directory assistance, an operator manning switchboards in a room hysterical with phones. Decades of giving people what they wanted, and quickly, honed her accommodating but no-bullshit attitude.

It serves her well as an Aunt Charlie’s cocktail waitress. Her cracked soprano bawls out drink orders and insults with blunt conviction. She is one of the show’s oldest and longest-perform-

ing queens and a seasoned crowd-pleaser. When she lumbers onstage in a pigtailed wig and sunglasses, lip-synching Kesha’s “Tik Tok” with a shot of Jim Beam in hand, you understand that ridiculousness is a commodity. So is fatigue. Often she abandons a performance midway through to raise a general complaint about hot flashes or nausea or how shitty the crowd is for not tipping well. Sometimes, particularly during her renditions of Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walkin,’” she exits the bar altogether, leaving only a contrail of perfume and sweat. “I’m glad that’s over,” she announces the instant the music stops. She counts her tips at the end of the bar, and the dollars crackle like kindling.

WHEN DID YOU START DOING DRAG?

I was in high school in Santa Barbara, about 1970. There was one bar that was run by some lesbian, and she used to let all of the underage kids in. One person that worked there—his name was Miss Eddy—wanted to start a drag show. He asked me to do a couple numbers. I was 18. It wasn’t very good drag. Throw a little bit of lipstick on, a real paint-by-numbers job. I went to college, moved to San Francisco in 1973, and then didn’t start drag again until about 1979.

WHAT WAS SAN FRANCISCO LIKE THEN?

When I first moved here, the Tenderloin had, like, 14 gay bars. There was Aunt Charlie’s—it was the Queen Mary in those days—and across the street was the Blue and Gold, which was a black bar. Next to that was the Sound of Music, and around the corner was the Ram’s Head. Down at the end was the Peter Pan, the Road Runner, about four or five others. In those days, the Castro was not the Castro. Polk Street was where it was all at.

There was also the Black Rose, which I managed for four years. It was—how do I say it?—a working girl’s bar, a transgender bar. It was a very mixed bag in terms of clientele. They’d make, like, \$7,000 to \$10,000 on a Friday or Saturday night.

WERE YOU DRESSING UP THEN?

Yes. I moved down to the Tenderloin and met all these whores, and all my friends were drag queens, so I just picked it up from



Donna Personna

“THEY DEAL IN SUPERLATIVES WITH ME. THEY BARE THEIR SOULS. AND MY FAVORITE THING IS TO SAY NO.”

– DONNA PERSONNA

there. I never intended to be in a drag show. I wanted to be one of these fish, you know, but it didn’t work out that way.

DID YOU ACTUALLY WANT TO BECOME A WOMAN?

We all wanted to be women. That was my game plan. But for some reason I got distracted and it didn’t happen. If I could do it over, I probably wouldn’t have gotten involved in the [Imperial] Court or started performing. I would have been some tranny queen running around. I never expected it all to last this long. I got to be in my late 30s, early 40s, before I really thought about transitioning. At that point, I said to myself, *You’re too old*. Plus, my first husband was not enthralled with the idea. I just couldn’t decide if I really wanted to go the whole route. And when I finally figured it out, it didn’t matter because I was happy as I was.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE COLLETTE?

A dirty, rotten bitch.

DO YOU ENJOY PERFORMING?

I don’t really think of myself as an entertainer. It just comes with the territory. I tend to gravitate to numbers I think I can do. When I started doing Kesha, I was only going to do it once or twice and call it a day. But then the crowd liked it, and 99% of the time they don’t realize I’m drinking Coke in that shot glass.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHILE YOU’RE UP ON THE STAGE?

When is it over?

WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE SAY TO YOU AFTER THE SHOW?

“Are you on Facebook? Do you have email?” Ninety percent of the time, I don’t pay much attention because they all sort of say the same things. They’ll say, “Oh, you’re so gorgeous!” Mary, I’m 63 years old. I’m not that pretty!

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT PERFORMING AT AUNT CHARLIE’S?

I like that it’s more intimate than most bars. Some bars, you’re on a stage and the crowd is way out there. At Aunt Charlie’s, they’re practically on you. And you can get drunk there for \$20.

DONNA PERSONNA: A FERAL ANIMAL, WILD CAUGHT

Cupertino is about an hour south of San Francisco. The distance feels longer by train, both because you have to disembark at Sunnyvale and drive the remaining four miles, and because the surrounding scenery is so banal: subdivisions and model homes and traffic inching down the 101. Sunlight wallops everything.

It is the prototypical Silicon Valley community. Apple is headquartered here, as are a number of enterprising tech firms and startups. The population is affluent and educated. Their public schools are better than yours. It’s an unlikely place to find Donna Personna. Then again, Donna has the Gold Rush spirit of the techies around her. She’s optimistic and dreamy. She has a pompadour and a Virgin of Guadalupe medallion. It was only late in life—long after most people put such indulgences to bed—that

she discovered her calling as a performer. She pursued it single-mindedly, egregiously, and was born again.

During the week, she’s a hairdresser in Cupertino. Her salon-cum-apartment is at the heart of a strip mall, sandwiched between a Chinese takeout joint and a convenience store whose shelves remain eerily bare. Every weekend she drives her beat-to-shit Toyota Tercel into San Francisco. Whoever she is as a man is left behind. For 48 hours, there’s only Donna with her hydraulic cackle and wandering tits, her cagey eroticism. She performs the way a faith healer works: aerobically, with a laying on of hands.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME YOU SAW A DRAG QUEEN?

When I was 16 or 17, I wanted a faggot life, so I got on a Greyhound in San Jose and came up here. I found this all-night diner, Compton’s Cafeteria, and there were these drag queens and transnies who were prostitutes. [On a balmy night in August 1966, a mob rioted at Compton’s Cafeteria after police manhandled a transgender patron. The building that once housed Compton’s is across the street from Aunt Charlie’s.] They were killers, some of them. They would use their heels to beat men, and they had shanks and guns. They did heroin, all kinds of drugs, but the bitches never offered me anything. I used to go to their hotel rooms. Ten girls would share one dumpy room so they could afford the \$80 a month or whatever. The image I’ll always remember is the basin where they washed their faces. It was full of makeup.

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE NAME DONNA PERSONNA?

My first choice was Paige Turner. People said there’s already a Paige Turner. Well, I never met her. I wanted to say “I am *the* Paige Turner. Read me!” I don a persona, I put something on. I’m a punster. I love language and words. If you please me, I’m Donna Creation. If you make me unhappy, I’m Donna Destruction.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE DONNA?

She’s wild. Wide awake. A mess. Passionate. She lives what she’s lip-synching. *She lives it*. She brings the Donna party.

DO YOU WISH YOU HAD STARTED DOING DRAG EARLIER IN LIFE?

No. It took me 45 years to get over stage fright. No one on this planet ever told me not to do something. I told myself not to do it. Eventually, I walked into the fear.

HOW DID YOU FEEL THE FIRST TIME YOU DRESSED UP?

Oh my God, such shame! It was difficult to leave the building. But I always want to do things that scare me because then I’m in a heightened state of being alive. I feel more alive during drag. And that’s our struggle in life: To stay engaged.

WHAT SCARES YOU ABOUT DRAG NOW?

I feel like I’m bamboozling people. I have no talent, I’m no good, but they let me do this. I’ve had people say, “When I see you in a room, I know I’m going to be OK.” Some guy said, “No one makes me feel like you do when you’re dancing.” They deal in superlatives with me. They bare their souls. And my favorite thing is to say no. I find different ways of saying it. For example, I’ve decided I’m never going home with anyone [again]. I want someone to love me forever. Once I spent four hours with this man from France, and it was fabulous. He was singing in my ear, we were making out, he was saying we would be together for eternity, on and on for hours. Finally he said, “I imagine we are not going to have the sexual experience tonight?” I said, “You have a wonder-

ful imagination, baby, but I imagined that four hours ago.”

DO MEN OFTEN TRY TO PICK YOU UP WHEN YOU’RE IN DRAG?

I’ve gone home with 200 or 300 men. But look, I’m an old lady. I’ve had two relationships in my life that were more than 15 years each. I was married—I’ve had that, and I’m not a greedy bitch. Sometimes a man will say, “May I buy you a drink?” And I say, “No, you may not. I’m not going to owe you anything. That’s how I like my drinks.”

DO YOU FEEL COMPETITIVE WITH OTHER QUEENS?

No. They do with me. Sooner or later, I have a falling-out with everyone. They think I’m a big bitch.

HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU’RE ONSTAGE?

I feel powerful. But I don’t want to be in control of anything. When I’m interpreting a song, I’m not doing it to the lampshade. I’m always singing it to someone. I like being close to the audience. I like that Aunt Charlie’s is dark and has a spotlight. I’m less effective when I see too much.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PERFORMANCE STYLE?

It’s so physical, like I’m a storm. And people are afraid of inclement weather. They don’t know what to expect. They think I’m on crack. It’s the opposite of being bored. I would like people to feel something. If the absence of such is hurtful, well, I’m here to get hurt. The audience is not responsible for me. Ultimately, I don’t know what’s appropriate. I didn’t go to school for this. I look directly into their eyes, and that alone is a dangerous thing.

WHAT’S IT LIKE BACKSTAGE?

I’m old. I’m losing my faculties. I hear less, I see less, I feel less. I easily enter my own world back there. It’s all a circus to me. I just try to get along. That’s what I’ve learned from showbiz: Lower my expectations. This is the Tenderloin—it ain’t Broadway. I just try to get out of everybody’s

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way. Some queen will say, “This is my mirror.” OK, bitch, show me a receipt! Donna is a chameleon, you know? I’m a feral animal, wild caught. In the animal kingdom, those who adapt are the ones who stay standing.

YOU’RE ALMOST 70 NOW. HOW LONG WILL YOU CONTINUE PERFORMING?

I’m odd in that when I don’t have an assignment, a little voice inside says, “You’re worthless. You have no purpose.” That comes with anxiety. To relieve that anxiety, I have to have a purpose in the world. I feel like I’m serving a great purpose—I feel so alive—when I’m performing.

I’m not afraid of losing anything. You can’t lose what you never owned. If it’s not there for me, I never had it. I’m so in love with what was, so happy and grateful for what was, not pissed off over what isn’t. And that keeps me in the game. Is that the right answer? ■

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